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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: COLOMBIA CONFLICT UPDATE - Q1'07

REF: A. 06 BOGOTA 3814
[B](#). 06 BOGOTA 7383
[C](#). 06 BOGOTA 9448
[D](#). BOGOTA 297
[E](#). BOGOTA 2839
[F](#). BOGOTA 1836
[G](#). 06 BOGOTA 11488
[H](#). BOGOTA 884
[I](#). BOGOTA 3093

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Milton K. Drucker
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#). (C) The most prominent FARC attacks in the first quarter were urban bombings in Valle, Cauca, and Huila departments, with the group mostly on the defensive or quiet elsewhere. While ELN leadership continued talks with the GOC in Havana, the group conducted few attacks and sustained heavy losses at the hands of the COLAR and FARC. Emerging criminal groups continued to grow, with the COLMIL confronting them mainly in the north and northeast. In Buenaventura, the Marines and Police increased their strength to confront violence among feuding narco gangs and the FARC. In the campaign's main 'Omega' area in Meta and Caqueta, new offensive tactics may be bearing fruit against the enemy, while territorial control units establish permanent defense of civilians. The Venezuelan border area grew more unstable, with increased cross-border criminality. End Summary.

FARC Urban Attacks in Cali, Buenaventura

[2](#). (C) The most significant FARC attacks in the first quarter were urban bombings targeting the COLMIL. Most victims were civilian bystanders. Buenaventura (Valle) had nine grenade and bombing attacks, apparently in reprisal for police efforts to break up the FARC and other narco networks. The FARC also launched a series of bombing attempts against the mayor of Neiva (Huila). In Cauca, the FARC twice blew up electrical towers -- leaving up to 64 municipalities without power. It also set off car bombs, attacked police, and assassinated three members of a politician's family. These events garnered more media attention than last quarter's FARC ambushes of isolated COLMIL patrols (ref D). Outside the southwest, the FARC remained on the defensive, aside from its feud with the ELN. Local politicians in the northern

departments of Cesar and Bolivar told us the FARC may be attempting to lay low and focus on the drug trade until the end of President Uribe's term in 2010.

ELN: Taking a Beating

¶3. (S) As in prior quarters, the ELN launched few attacks and suffered substantial combat losses at the hands of the FARC and the COLAR. The ELN-FARC feud intensified in Arauca, partly fueled by COLAR psyops efforts and by COLAR intelligence exploitation of ELN deserters to strike FARC targets. Sensitive sources reported the ELN had cut into the FARC's drug sources in Norte de Santander, with coca cultivators preferring ELN cash to FARC IOU's. In Narino, the FARC declared an end to its 2006 local truce with the ELN -- ostensibly in protest over the ELN's Havana peace talks with the GOC, its offer to remove land mines, and its release of two police hostages. Fierce competition for control of narcotrafficking also drove Narino clashes.

New Criminal Groups: A Growing Threat

¶4. (C) The COLMIL increasingly confronted criminal groups (coined by GOC as "BACRIM"s, for 'bandas criminales') some of which include small numbers of renegade ex-AUC fighters. In the COLMIL's quarter-end tally of enemy takedowns, criminal groups accounted for the second largest share, 17 percent. The FARC accounted for 60 percent and the ELN 8 percent. Criminal groups were present in most of the country, but COLMIL action against them was primarily in the north and northeast. In Catatumbo, a joint Search Bloc of Army, Police, and law enforcement services (DAS and CTI) killed two and captured 15 members of the 'Black Eagles' (Aguilas Negras) in its first month of operation. Another 15 Aguilas were arrested in Magdalena. The COLMIL has not yet fully mobilized in Uraba, where criminal groups containing some ex-paras were expanding. In the southwest, new criminal groups publicly announced their arrival in Tolima, blocked roads and intimidated populations in Narino (ref E), and forged alliances with Valle coca cartels. Closer to narco gangs than the FARC, the new criminal groups required a law enforcement and intelligence-centered approach.

Buenaventura Under Siege

¶5. (C) Buenaventura suffered from soaring homicide rates (peaking at an annualized rate of 247 per 100,000 late last year, or seven times the national average) due to violent feuds among competing drug gangs (ref G) and the FARC. In the city's worst neighborhoods turf was defined street by street. Marines and police quadrupled their forces in the city, producing a wave of arrests, including that of several ringleaders, as well as mass surrenders of nearly 200 gang members. Security forces were optimistic violence would subside. Still, the long-term security situation in Buenaventura was not yet clear. Gangs could regenerate quickly, and it remained to be seen whether the COLMIL could maintain the increased force levels needed to consolidate the recent gains. (Note: A major bombing in Cali on April 9 virtually destroyed a Police headquarters. The attack, attributed to the FARC, focused attention on the southwest. President Uribe responded with additional security in the region and relocated his seat of government to Cali during the week of April 23 in a show of support for local residents. End note.)

Meta / Caqueta: Offensive Mobility, Defensive Consolidation

¶6. (C) In the counter-FARC campaign's main effort area of Joint Task Force Omega, the COLMIL was working to improve

offensive mobility and consolidate territorial control. The Army began testing smaller, more mobile strike units (ref F) to penetrate FARC fronts' outer defenses and to reach high value targets (HVTs). Some units made contact with larger FARC concentrations, yielding higher takedowns (10 or 12 per combat, instead of one or two) in what may be a new trend. Meanwhile, in key towns formerly controlled by the FARC (Uribe, La Julia, La Macarena, and Calamar) the COLAR will soon transition from mobile offensive elements (BCGs) to fixed territorial units. This releases offensive forces to clear new areas and sends a strong signal to the local population of COLMIL commitment to defend civilians. The case of Union Peneya (ref H) was a microcosm of the south: its resettled townspeople were waiting to see if a dedicated COLAR battalion could hold off hovering FARC units and if the GOC would introduce additional basic services in the town. Bombings of Nestle dairy processing plants in January and February threatened the GoC efforts in Caqueta and recent economic progress in the region.

Venezuela Border: Cross-Border Criminality

¶7. (C) The northeast department of Cesar contained several battle zones -- against two FARC fronts in the north and ELN and Aguilas Negras farther south -- mostly over control of strategic mobility corridors for narcotics trafficking across the border into Venezuela (ref I). Aside from transport of coca (out) and arms and supplies (in), these corridors provided communication for FARC leaders reportedly based in northwest Venezuela (e.g. 'Ivan Marquez,' 'Timochenko,' and 'Grannobles'). Military sources in the region told us the border area was showing increased instability due to growing crime rates and cross-border operations by the FARC and ELN. This caused some Venezuelans to migrate to the Colombian side -- creating a mini construction boom in Cucuta (N Santander). A Colombian commander in the area said his Venezuelan counterparts had admitted the emerging problems. Corruption inside Venezuela made a security crackdown unlikely, however.

Combat Focus Areas

¶8. (C) The areas of most intense combat continued to be Antioquia, Arauca / Boyaca / Casanare ('ABC'), and Meta, with increased clashes in the Cesar / Venezuela border zone and substantial operations in Huila / Tolima / Cauca, Caqueta, and Putumayo. In Antioquia, clashes continued at a high rate. Three-way fighting in the 'ABC' zone intensified among COLAR, FARC, and ELN. In Meta, battles have focused around Villhermosa and Puerto Rico in the Macarena area -- a zone of FARC concentration and extensive coca cultivation. In Cauca, the COLAR was fighting to protect the Pan-American Highway against FARC road blocks and infrastructure attacks along the increasingly violent southwest Pacific Coast.
Drucker